

HE STILL HAS A VISION

Former Elm Grove man keeps his sights on living a full life despite being blind

**By Noel Stollenwerk
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The light sounds of classical music coming from room H-8 inform others that Phil Lehmann is home.

His neighbors at Manor Park Senior Center (8536 W. Oklahoma Ave., in West Allis) can simply peek in his room and see he is there, probably tinkering with his favorite toy, a ham radio.

Phil, however, cannot return the glance to acknowledge his neighbor's presence. Unless someone makes a noise, or lends a friendly "hello," the neighbor probably goes unnoticed.

Despite going on nearly seven years since he last saw the beauty that the world holds, Lehmann is not one to complain about his loss of sight. You see, the former Elm Grove resident can put a positive spin on just about anything.

"The days are too short," said the feisty Lehmann, describing his age as "81 and a half." Not ready to give up his hobbies quite yet, he adds "I still have a few good years in me yet."

It's hard to argue with this seemingly wizard of electronics. With a complete short-wave ham radio in his room, and three antennas prot-

uding from the top of the building, Lehmann looks as if he were able to safely bring a space shuttle in for a successful landing. His pastime of honing into conversation with folks from all over the planet keeps him occupied for the vast majority of his time.

With acquaintances in every Western European country, as well as Russia, Africa, Australia, and Japan, Lehman has little time to sit around the senior center and feel sorry for himself.

Most in his situation would do differently, but Lehmann once

again remains upbeat and positive.

"You have to, or else you'll go crazy," he said. "If I were born (blind), I wouldn't know the difference anyway. You overcome it, and you don't even think about it."

Sacrifice

When Phil does recall his bout with a rare eye disease, he can take solace in the fact that his role as an experimental patient has helped others retain their eyesight, even if he has lost his.

Lehmann was diagnosed with the

cornea abnormality in the 1960s, and in 1969 was chosen from a group representing citizens from all over the country to participate in an experimental procedure to transplant his corneas.

"They picked me out to be the guinea pig, I guess," Phil joked, having no regrets to being the chosen one. The United States federal government funded the research, and Lehmann was to be the white mouse, if you will.

Having suffered from reoccurring blisters on his cornea, and destined to lose his sight completely without the treatment, Lehmann underwent the treatment at the University of Florida in Gainesville. Still living in Elm Grove, however, Phil and his wife racked up some pretty hefty frequent flyer mileage, all courtesy of the federal government.

"I must have made 57 round trips to Florida during that span," Phil remembered. "We'd always tie it in with about three weeks in Florida, though. As long as the government allowed me to take expenses off..."

After two dozen years of treatment, Lehmann's eyesight returned to 20/25, nearly perfect according to doctor's standards. Things appeared to be working out.

But then Lehmann's wife passed away after her long bout with Alzheimer's disease in October of 1988. Three weeks later, Phil awoke from his night's sleep and everything was dark. He suddenly, and without warning, had lost his eyesight altogether.



Although Phil Lehmann is almost blind, he delights in teaching others how to operate ham radios.

(CNI photo by Jack Plale)

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Starting over

The condition was not the result of his previous battle with the cornea disease, but instead was caused by a blood infection that swelled an artery in his eye, cutting off the oxygen flow.

After having spent the previous 36 years in Elm Grove, he was basically forced to leave and move into the retirement center.

"The doctor says that I have one percent vision in one eye, and the other is completely dead," Phil said. "All I see is shadows."

With special aids, however, Lehmann is able to do many of the things he loves. He biggest love is his radio system.

"I'm not involved in it as much as I'd like to be," he said, noting he would like to be one of the storm-trackers that hunt down threatening weather in their cars. "They won't let me drive, though."

Instead, he sits attentively by his radio during severe weather, waiting for any reports of funnel clouds moving in his direction.

"I told them (storm-trackers associated with the National Weather Service) whatever happens, please let me know (if severe weather is approaching)," Phil said, noting the 1,400 or so residents that reside at the senior center during the day.

And while he isn't allowed to drive, he does still enjoy traveling. Lehmann spent two weeks in Hawaii last year, and will spend two weeks in Colorado in a couple weeks. Soon after that, he will travel

to Seattle to visit his niece, who is helping him with a book that he soon hopes will be published.

The book follows the travels and tribulations of his great-grandfather, who came to the U.S. from Germany in 1832. He soon became a professor at the University of Georgia-Athens, one of only three teachers at the 500-student college at the time.

Lehmann said that he has collected scores of letters and other material depicting his family's ancestry. Many are written in German, an area where his niece — who holds a doctorate in German — is of valuable help.

Phil and his niece are putting the finishing touches on the work, and he is already shopping around for a potential publisher.

When he isn't busy with his authoring, he helps the senior center hold training courses and exams for licensing needed to operate ham radios. He's retired from teaching those classes, but still plays an integral role in accomodating the students and teachers.

It's just another in the long line of activities that the radio junkie dabbles in in order to pass the time. And while most people's time seems to come and go in the drop of a hat, Lehmann feels he has a lot to accomplish yet. Even if it means doing things over again.

"I hadn't seen a movie in about 18 years," he said, recalling he recently went to a showing of the award-winning "Forrest Gump." "I still get around and manage to stay awfully busy. I always have, and always will."